

Baltimore Sun

Political Notebook: Elkridge residents fight against big political odds State and CSX

By **Larry Carson**, The Baltimore Sun
May 6, 2011

Fighting City Hall is never easy, but Elkridge residents are getting high marks for their quick ability to organize to try to fend off a possible site for a major rail cargo transfer facility in their community.

There is a lot at stake on both sides in a decision that puts a community's view of its future welfare in the context of a major economic project, backed by the O'Malley administration and CSX railroad, that could determine the future of Maryland's chief port.

The widening of the Panama Canal will allow ever-larger container ships from Asia to reach the East Coast, and officials with the port of Baltimore want to be able to cash in. To do that, CSX must be able to double-stack 40-foot-long steel cargo containers on rail cars headed to the Midwest, but Baltimore's antiquated Howard Street Tunnel isn't big enough to accommodate such traffic.

That's the background for a plan to build a \$150 million transfer station south of the tunnel that would allow containers brought from the port either by rail or truck to be lifted and stacked two-high by huge magnetic cranes. The site must be rectangular, at least 70 acres, and have highway access. Four locations are being considered

Although the outcome for Elkridge is far from clear, the Greater Elkridge Community Association's campaign to rally both the community and elected officials to their side could serve as a model for what an organized group of residents can do in two months, even against big corporate money and politically powerful opponents.

"I just know if enough people get together, you can move some of these things," said **Howard Johnson**, the association's president. "This is just wrong" from the community's perspective, he said, because of the potential for 24-hour-a-day noise, lights, idling diesel engines and hundreds of big trucks rumbling between Route 100 and the site.

Johnson said he quickly reached out to people beyond his group who live near the proposed site, along the main Camden rail line at **Hanover** and Race roads, once he heard about the project from Howard County Councilwoman Courtney Watson, an **Ellicott City** Democrat who works closely with his group.

Other potential sites include one next to the tracks north of Montevideo Road, also in Howard; one next to a state prison in Jessup, **Anne Arundel County**; and one between a business park and federally owned Department of Agriculture land in Beltsville, in **Prince George's County**. Watson quickly got county planners to determine that there are 365 homes sit within a quarter-mile of the Elkridge site, compared with 21 near the other Howard site and none near the Arundel site. A number of townhouses are near the Beltsville site, but Elkridge's reaction has by far been the largest and the loudest.

Johnson quickly arranged for someone to testify at a school board meeting on the facility's implications for plans to build a new elementary school on nearby **Coca Cola Drive**, and set up a committee of about a dozen people who did research, even traveling to Pennsylvania to record noise levels and video of a similar facility. Others created a Facebook page on the project, created protest signs and T-shirts, and sent out mass email to rally residents and local politicians for several well-attended community meetings. The school board has put off any decision on a badly needed new building until at least June, when the CSX list of sites might drop from four to two, state officials said.

Since Johnson first heard about the project in late February, his association has organized a vigorous campaign to knock their community off the state's list.

"They've clearly been effective in demonstrating their concerns to the public," said Howard County Executive Ken Ulman. Ulman has said he backs the project but opposes any location that will hurt an existing community and believes, as does Del. James E. Malone Jr., that it will never be built in Elkridge because of the strong local opposition.

In one way, the Elkridge campaign is easier than others because no one is out to kill what all acknowledge is a good project that will benefit the region, but Johnson pointed out that with the economic stakes so high, Elkridge residents could get short shrift.

"They don't care about your homes. They don't care about your neighborhood," he said of railroad and state officials.

Elkridge residents merely want to persuade state officials to drop their community from the list of potential sites along the main Camden line. At the same time, because of the potential regional impact, Gov. Martin O'Malley and CSX officials have refused to alter the 9- to 12-month federal evaluation process involving all four sites. Observers are impressed, however, with the community's effort.

"They are effective advocates who do their homework," said Watson, a potential candidate for county executive in 2014. "I would venture to say that the committee understands more about this intermodal facility project, both its impact on the community and its importance to the state, than some of the people at CSX do," she added. "They are a force to be reckoned with."

More than 200 people attended the Maryland Department of Transportation's information workshop April 27 at Elkridge Landing Middle School — almost all of them strongly opposed to the project's location in Elkridge. According to state officials, only about 40 people attended a similar session in Jessup the week before, and about 130 came to the first session the night before in Beltsville.

The community's strength lies partly in its history. Residents have at times felt that they live in an older, historically blue-collar area where people often feel neglected by government compared to more prosperous places like Columbia and Ellicott City. Now Elkridge is one of Howard's fastest-growing areas, and that, Johnson has frequently complained, has ratcheted up the pressure on public facilities like schools and roads.

"I think it's a community that's used to having to fight battles," said state Sen. Edward J. Kasemeyer, a Democrat who is the chairman of the senate's powerful Budget and Tax Committee; he also represents the area. "I think they're very well-organized."

Ulman and the school board have moved to address some of community's concerns, with plans for several new schools, a larger fire station, a new regional park and plans to enlarge or rebuild the library.

Even critics of the community's views are praising their public pressure campaign.

"It's impressive," said Dennis Lane, a local blogger and commercial real estate businessman who favors the rail facility at the Elkridge site. "I think they're doing an admirable job of rallying the troops." Lane argues that the land in question is zoned industrial and lies along a long-existing rail line where noisy trains pass all the time. He argued in his blog, "Tales of Two Cities" that if the Elkridge site works best for the railroad and the state, "they have every right to put it there." He believes it will bring jobs, aid local warehouse businesses and add to the county's commercial base.

larry.carson@baltsun.com